Conference Review

The environmental crisis that faces the world today is undeniable, and the problems we confront multiply: climate change, species extinction, pollution. In the context of this crisis, questions of ontology, value, ethics, poetics, and epistemology are sometimes lost in the focus on practical problem-solving and empirical results. The Thinking Through Nature summit, hosted by the University of Oregon and co-sponsored by the International Association of Environmental Philosophy (IAEP), brought together more than 150 scholars, writers, filmmakers, artists, architects, and activists for a four-day series of reflections on what the humanities and arts can contribute to thinking through human relationships with our endangered world.

In addition to the more than fifty interdisciplinary panels of speakers, the summit included an afternoon of workshops, the premiere of the documentary film *Hotspots*, and excursions to local sites. Philosopher and writer Kathleen Dean Moore collaborated with forest ecologist Fred Swan-son to lead a hike through old-growth in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest. Architect Brook Muller led a walking tour of urban planning and design implemented in Eugene alleyways. A final excursion included a tasting and tour of organically-certified King Estate Wineries. A post-conference backpacking trip led participants through the Oregon Dunes. The conference also sought to walk the talk, offsetting the carbon costs of participant travel with a student-designed project for insulating chilled water and steam piping on the UO campus. Local and organic food and wine were offered whenever possible, along with vegetarian and vegan options.

The keynote speakers reflected the interdisciplinary approach of the summit as well as contributing to this conversation through their own disciplinary-bending performances. In his opening address, “Reconciliation Ecology: Ethical and Philosophical Issues with the Conservation and Use of Biodiversity,” ethnobotanist and conservationist Gary Paul Nabhan detailed a series of case studies in working with issues of environmental justice and cross-cultural communication, calling for philosophers to become involved in negotiating these crucial relationships. On the second evening of the conference, philosopher John Llewelyn gave a keynote entitled “Barbarism, Humanism and Democratic Ecology.” Drawing on the
work of Levinas and Derrida, Dr. Llewelyn offered a probing series of questions about our ethical relationships with the nonhuman world, arguing for existence rather than sentience as a basis for thinking through our responsibilities to nonhuman nature. Theorist Donna Haraway, speaking at the Saturday banquet, drew on her recent work in coevolutionary relations and companion species to suggest a provocative series of questions about appropriate responses to animal others in her address, “When Species Meet: Attachment Sites for Out-of-Place Companions.” On Sunday evening, the closing keynote “The Place of Architecture in Environmental Design” was given by Alberto Pérez-Gómez, who drew on the Western philosophical tradition, particularly phenomenology, to examine the convergence of poetics and social justice in architectural design. In addition to these four thinkers, a Saturday afternoon keynote by ecofeminist Karen Warren was sponsored by the Society for Ecofeminism, Environmental Justice, and Social Ecology. In her talk, “Taking Empirical Data Seriously, Really!,” Dr. Warren spoke about the importance of ecofeminism in bringing the experiences and concerns of women to the center of environmental philosophy, as well as for the need for environmental philosophers to engage with empirical methods and results.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this conference was the dialogue that took place across disciplinary boundaries, in the keynotes, through the panel sessions (many of which brought together presenters from different disciplines), and in the breaks over food and drink. From philosophy, presenters spoke about questions including the ethics of natural systems, nature and transcendence, the contributions of figures such as Plato, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty for thinking through philosophy of nature, environmental aesthetics, and post-humanism. Ecocritical scholars engaged with the fields of environmental justice, ecology, and science studies, focusing on a range of ideas in literary texts, ecopolitics, and popular culture. Artists and architects offered case studies from around the world and discussed concepts of ecological citizenship, complexity, urban planning, and ecology. A series of panels on pedagogy and sustainability bridged questions of theory and practice in the university and beyond. Unlike conventional disciplinary-based conferences, this event gave participants the opportunity to learn about unexpected convergences with other fields and to share ideas and resources for addressing contemporary concerns. The only draw-